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The Philippine Opposition: Gains by the Left

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An Intelligence Assessment

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*EA 84-10038
March 1984*

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An Intelligence Assessment

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**The Philippine Opposition:
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Key Judgments*Information available
as of 27 February 1984
was used in this report.*

The period of apathy that characterized Philippine politics for more than a decade ended with the assassination of Benigno Aquino, and President Marcos's moderate opponents have been given a new opportunity to revitalize their political careers. They have been unable to capitalize on it, however, apparently because they have little to offer Filipinos in the way of a political alternative. The moderates have also lost ground to new political alliances that are being infiltrated and influenced by the left, and they will continue losing ground in the period leading up to the National Assembly elections in May:

- They are organizationally weak and divided and seem unable to resolve their internal differences.
- They have been unable to translate widespread disaffection with the Marcos regime into effective action, such as convincing Marcos of the need to open up the political system and allow real development of opposition parties and institutions.

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The Communist Party of the Philippines has acted quickly to exploit the present crisis by concentrating on infiltrating legal opposition groups. We believe it will continue to make gains in the next few months through political front activity—particularly among organized labor—because of the poorly performing economy and financial austerity measures now being implemented by the government.

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All this comes at a time when the conduct of domestic politics is changing. The moderate opposition is in transition from personality-dominated parties to new issue-oriented groups that are focusing on questions such as the succession and corruption. How far this process will go forward is yet to be determined, but this much is reasonably clear:

- If Marcos's reluctance to undertake the political reforms sought by the moderates continues, the Communists will be the chief beneficiary.
- Growing polarization could force the moderate opposition to take a harder, nationalistic, anti-US position in the near future, further eroding the political middle ground.
- Domestic unrest could escalate rapidly after the Assembly elections, fed by polarization and the faltering economy, if Filipinos become convinced the voting was not relatively fair by their standards.

25X1

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25X1

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Key Judgments	iii
Understanding Philippine Politics	1
The Accelerating Tempo of Change	1
The Old Politics and Politicians	1
And the New Politics	1
The Moderates Versus Marcos	1
Role of the Communist Party	3
Moving Toward the Election	4
The Moderates' Electoral Dilemma	4
Continued Communist Gains	4
Implications for the United States	5

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The Philippine Opposition: Gains by the Left

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Understanding Philippine Politics

Eighteen years of President Marcos's authoritarian rule have transformed Philippine politics and kept his opponents weak and divided. Before martial law was imposed in 1972, patronage was the key to a political system of many fiefdoms controlled by locally prominent families. Politics was personality oriented, with loyalties to people, not parties, and elections depended on who could deliver the goods and, thus, the vote. Like many Philippine politicians, including Marcos, even Benigno Aquino built his career by cultivating politicians and negotiating alliances; in a system where opportunism was a way of life, he switched parties twice with apparent ease. In any event, because a two-party system existed, power changed hands frequently through regular, although often fraudulent, elections.

This changed during martial law, when regularly scheduled elections were interrupted and Marcos consolidated political power through his ruling party—the KBL (New Society Movement). Marcos co-opted most new political talent into the ruling party, and the rest regrouped in weakened and ineffectual opposition parties that Marcos skillfully played off against each other and allowed only token representation in the National Assembly.

The Accelerating Tempo of Change

The Old Politics and Politicians. Traditional politicians, thus, had been steadily losing popular support to new groups well before the assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino in August 1983. These new groups sought to appeal to Filipinos on the basis of issues—such as political reform, the succession, and reducing corruption—rather than personalities and frequently took more radical positions. Support for the traditional political parties—loosely allied in the United Nationalist Democratic Organization (UNIDO)—eroded further in 1982 when other centers of opposition emerged, the economy faltered, and Marcos began to crack down on his opponents in the business community and the Church. We believe this process has accelerated since the Aquino assassination

because the moderate opposition has been incapable of putting together an effective political program to wrest major reforms from Marcos (see table).

And the New Politics. Because of the combination of Marcos's tactics and the moderates' own failings, we believe the moderates have had to make tacit alliances with more radical and better organized groups such as the new umbrella alliance, Justice for Aquino, Justice for All (JAJA), which was formed after Aquino's assassination and which most observers credit with being in the forefront of organizing antigovernment protests.

JAJA started the civil disobedience campaign to boycott the government-controlled press and businesses associated with the Marcos family. It was also the organizing force behind the massive demonstrations in Manila and Cebu last fall that drew crowds numbering in the hundreds of thousands, according to press reports (see photo). An alliance of 94 human rights, labor, and professional organizations, JAJA has been successful partly because of its close relationship with the Aquino family which lends the group greater prestige and popularity. We believe JAJA's ability to turn large numbers out on the streets, however, is largely a result of its heavy penetration by the Communist Party of the Philippines' (CPP) political arm, the National Democratic Front (NDF), an alliance of Communist-directed front groups active among workers, students, professionals, and the Church.

The Moderates Versus Marcos

Despite widespread public support for the opposition's goals and its ability to move its campaign from Manila to the provinces, moderate opposition groups remain unable to exploit the assassination as a political windfall. All the moderate groups to a greater or lesser extent are weakened by internal factionalism and mutual suspicions, much the way they had been

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A month after Aquino's assassination, also the anniversary of the imposition of martial law, hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated against the government.



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during martial law. Six months after the assassination, for example, a unification agreement is more elusive than ever, the moderates lack a leader to rally behind, and they are not perceived by many Filipinos as a political alternative, according to the leading financial newspaper in Manila. Moderate opposition parties have also suffered because the Church and the business community thus far have preferred to retain their independent avenues of antigovernment protest rather than rally behind any single political organization.

Nonetheless, the moderate political parties—along with businessmen and the Church—have reached a general consensus on reforms that they believe are necessary to strengthen domestic political institutions and to put an end to concerns about the succession should anything happen to Marcos. These include restoring press freedom, modifying electoral rules to ensure fair National Assembly elections in May, assuring the independence of the new legislature, eliminating the Preventive Detention Act and other presidential decrees they view as repressive, and putting an end to corruption and cronyism.

For his part, Marcos—in what has become his classic fashion of dealing with the opposition—has appeared responsive without conceding any real power. The

issues he has given some ground on, moreover, are a response to pressures primarily from the business community and the Church rather than the traditional politician, who, in our view, Marcos does not consider a political threat.

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In October he directed that the Constitution be amended to allow for elections on a provincial rather than a regional basis—which in principle would help the weaker opposition in the election. These changes were ratified in a national plebiscite in January 1984. Marcos will also allow party switching and permit coalitions of opposition groups to place candidates on the ballot. In addition, he has agreed to appoint two new members to the elections commission who would be acceptable to moderate opponents, revise the voter registration list, and suspend the Preventive Detention Act until after the elections.

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Many opposition politicians argue, however, that Marcos's true intentions were disclosed in a recent move to amend the election code being considered by the National Assembly. The President had proposed legislation—which he has since dropped—allowing him to add 20 appointed seats to the new National

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Assembly, which is supposed to have 183 elective seats and a constitutionally mandated maximum of 17 appointed seats.¹ Marcos's proposal would have raised the total number of assemblymen to 220, a move his opponents claim would have allowed him to stack the legislature if the opposition won a majority in the elections. [REDACTED]

The succession remains murky until 1987, when a vice president will be elected. Marcos initially resisted the idea of restoring the office of vice president but agreed when several members of his own party joined the business community in pressing for the change. Waiting until 1987, however, when Marcos's term of office ends and new presidential elections are scheduled, has not addressed the business community's concerns should anything happen to Marcos before then. As a result, Marcos offered a formula, which was also ratified in last January's plebiscite, that provides for the Speaker of the National Assembly to assume power until new elections can be held. The current Speaker is a Marcos loyalist. [REDACTED]

Role of the Communist Party

The CPP has moved rapidly to exploit disaffection with the Marcos government since the assassination, even though it is a relatively small part of the opposition movement. [REDACTED] the Central Committee remains divided between supporting opposition demands for Marcos's resignation and accelerating armed struggle, but, as far as we can tell, the thrust of Communist strategy has been to influence and, when possible, to dominate the legal opposition movement through its political front organizations. [REDACTED]

Superior organization has served the CPP well. Barely four days after Aquino's murder, the party's Central Committee met and began a concerted propaganda attack on the Marcos government. Since then, according to press reports, the National Democratic Front has stepped up its offers of organizational and logistic support to moderate opposition groups, and we believe they have little choice but to accept them for now. [REDACTED]

¹ The National Assembly currently has 184 members, 169 of whom belong to the KBL (New Society Movement). Of the total, 165 seats are elected and 19 are either appointed by the President or selected as "sectoral" representatives. [REDACTED]

Several moderate opposition leaders recently told US Embassy officials that roughly half of JAJA's member organizations are Communist front groups and claimed that the NDF is making all of JAJA's major policy decisions. According to US Embassy officials, JAJA leader Jose Diokno, who initially believed he could use the left to his advantage, now reportedly is considering leaving the alliance because of growing NDF influence. UNIDO's leaders have been skeptical about cooperating with the NDF all along, but they apparently believe they cannot afford to be left behind. [REDACTED]

Whatever the degree of influence, the success of CPP-NDF strategy is evident in the leading role of the JAJA alliance in opposition activities. Although JAJA is ostensibly non-Communist and moderate, it has led at least two demonstrations against the US Embassy and is blaming the United States for the Philippines' financial difficulties. JAJA has also adopted a strong stand against multinational corporations and the presence of US bases in the Philippines. [REDACTED]

Church groups associated with the NDF have been prominent at opposition rallies and are also active in the JAJA grouping. [REDACTED]

The CPP is also increasing its efforts among urban workers where its main labor union alliance, the May First Organization (KMU), claims a membership of 500,000. According to press reports, the KMU is a member of JAJA and has been active in the upsurge of labor strife in Manila, including the shutdown of the Bataan Export Processing Zone last October. Butz Aquino, at a prayer rally for his brother in Davao last September, credited 50,000 KMU mar-

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shals with keeping his brother's funeral peaceful. Although we have no supporting evidence to confirm this, Aquino's comments suggest to us the increasing respectability of the KMU among the moderate opposition. [redacted]

Moving Toward the Election

The Moderates' Electoral Dilemma. Most Filipinos, in our view, regard the May elections as a critically important step toward long-term political stability. Fearing that established mechanisms for the succession are weak, moreover, they hope a relatively clean election will pave the way for a smooth transition to new leadership if Marcos becomes incapacitated or dies. Marcos, for his part, knows he will need the participation of moderate politicians to maintain the appearance of popular support for his rule. We believe that moderate political parties will thus be faced with a difficult dilemma: to participate in elections under less-than-ideal circumstances and thereby legitimize Marcos's rule, or boycott and risk political oblivion. [redacted]

The opposition remains divided over the boycott question, and at least a partial boycott of the May elections seems inevitable. All major opposition groups had agreed in mid-January to a comprehensive list of demands aimed at limiting Marcos's presidential decree-making powers, ensuring that the conduct of the elections is fair, and guaranteeing the independence of the new legislature. When Marcos failed to meet their conditions in February, several opposition groups announced their intention to campaign actively on behalf of the boycott. Others, such as UNIDO and PDP-Laban, have decided to participate for now. Even if most of the moderates participate, however, they are unlikely to garner more than the 20 to 30 percent of Assembly seats that Marcos [redacted] is apparently willing to allow them through his choice of election rules, media access, and ballot manipulation. Opposition leaders claim they would win a clear majority in a clean election. [redacted]

Regardless of whether they participate, the moderates stand to gain little after the elections are held. Those groups that choose to field candidates risk becoming tainted by their association with the regime, especially if the public believes the elections are rigged in favor

of the ruling party or the new Assembly has little power. At the same time, boycotting seems certain to ensure the moderates will be excluded from power during the critical transition to a post-Marcos period. In either case, the middle ground of Philippine politics will probably suffer further erosion as the opposition increasingly becomes identified with groups to the left of the political spectrum. [redacted]

Continued Communist Gains. Whatever the moderates decide, we believe the CPP will continue to gain ground recruiting through its political front groups and picking up support from disillusioned moderates along the way. The Communist Party is pressing for a boycott of the May elections, and we believe its ability to turn public opinion around on this issue will be an important indicator of its strength. [redacted]

Labor fronts will prove particularly fertile for Communist recruitment as a result of the continued poor outlook for the economy and austerity measures now being implemented.² Strikes and wage disputes have increased since the devaluation of the peso last October (the second in 1983), and we believe subsequent fuel and food price hikes will contribute to further labor unrest and mass protest activities. The US Embassy estimates that, as a result of the financial crisis, Manila may see a 50-percent unemployment rate early in 1984. A respected private economic research organization in Manila recently warned that austerity would result in the loss of 300,000 jobs by April. The recent formation of the Labor Party of the Philippines by leftist unions will provide the NDF with another avenue of legitimate political infiltration. [redacted]

We believe the CPP will also be able to capitalize on any failure of the moderates to convince Marcos to offer more electoral concessions and other major political reforms. Although the moderates have told US Embassy officials that they realize that Marcos will not step down voluntarily, their political program

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still relies heavily on his "doing the right thing"—by moving in the direction of revitalizing institutions such as the National Assembly, the press, and the judiciary. If he refuses, as he has in the past, the political environment is certain to become more polarized, in our view, and more defections to radical alliances will ensue. [REDACTED]

The CPP will also probably gain from a nationalist backlash against the government's development strategy. As Manila is forced to adopt austerity measures to restore order to its balance of payments, we believe the free market approach of the technocrats will increasingly come under attack. CPP propaganda appeals to a leftist streak that is common among the educated classes in the Philippines. This takes the form of hostility toward multinational corporations, foreign investments, international financial organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and, indirectly, the United States. [REDACTED]

Implications for the United States

Marcos's maneuvering on the election rules and other aspects of political reform suggest to us that the elections will not lead to an opening up of the political system, as many domestic and foreign observers are hoping. If we are right, the Assembly elections will not halt the transition to more radical politics currently at work in the Philippines. As this process unfolds, it will be increasingly difficult to tell the hard left (CPP) from the moderate left (JAJA) and the moderate left from the moderates (UNIDO). In addition, as the moderates' program for political and economic reform becomes discredited, we believe they will have to make accommodations to radical interests. The moderate opposition thus will increasingly be identified with groups who are more militant and who favor policies inimical to US interests. [REDACTED]

Filipinos are attaching great importance to the elections; many will expect the United States to succeed in pressing Marcos to hold fair elections and will blame the United States if the voting is widely perceived to be fraudulent. This suggests to us that the months following the elections could be marked by large anti-Marcos and anti-US demonstrations, punctuated by violence. We believe one explanation for the surprising lack of violence since the assassination has been the hope of relatively fair elections by Philippine standards. Once this expectation disappears, domestic unrest could escalate rapidly—fed by growing polarization and the faltering economy. [REDACTED]

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A Bird's-Eye View of the Opposition

	Key Leaders	Base	Platform/Demands	Constituent Organizations	Comments
Moderate					
UNIDO	Salvador Laurel Jose Laurel Eva Estrada Kalaw	Organized nationwide with most of its support on Luzon	Interested in elections but wants maximum concessions, including new voter lists and election commission and media access.	12, including anti-Marcos wing of Nacionalista Party, Kalaw faction of the Liberal Party, and regional parties.	Alliance of traditional political parties that many Filipinos consider obsolete.
Church	Cardinal Jaime Sin	Nationwide	National reconciliation, independent judiciary, and free elections.	Network of clergymen and lay people; Radio Veritas.	Church groups have long been active in human rights activity.
Businessmen	Vicente Jayme Enrique Zobel Jaime Oragui Dante Santos	Manila based	Press freedom, fair elections, credible investigation into Aquino slaying, and restoration of the vice-presidency, elimination of cronyism.	Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry; Businessmen for Aquino; Bishops-Businessmen's Conference; Makati Business Club.	Although on balance, the Church exerts a moderating role, Liberation theology (a Marxist religious philosophy) is popular in many parts of the country. Succession is major concern. Want less government involvement in the economy. Represent compromise position.
Transitional*					
Liberal Party	Jovito Salonga Dionisio Macapagal Abraham Sarmiento	Nationwide	Favors an election boycott.	Macapagal faction.	Aquino's political party. Broke from UNIDO in December. Traditional pre-marital-law party that has become more issue oriented. Its leadership is obsessed with removing US influence in the Philippines. Ideologically oriented party.
PDP-Laban	Aquilino Pimentel Antonio Cuenco Lorenzo Tanada Ramon Mitra Luis Jose Soc Rodrigo	Strongest in Mindanao and in the Visayas but is organizing on Luzon; Laban gives PDP-Laban its clout in Manila.	Interested in elections but wants maximum concessions, including new voter lists and election commission and media access. Opposes presence of US bases.	PDP; Laban.	May be infiltrated by CPP.
Justice for Aquino, Justice for All	Jose Diokno Butz Aquino Lorenzo Tanada Corason Aquino	Primarily Manila based but is organizing nationwide	Resignation of Marcos and release of political prisoners before considering other reforms.	94, including known front organizations of the CPP.	Collegial leadership style may inhibit it from acting quickly. Organized massive demonstrations in Cebu and Manila on 21 September. Diokno is a personal friend of Aquino family, and his group enjoys greater popularity and prestige by virtue of this association. Its demonstrations are increasingly anti-US in tone. Viewed as more vibrant and activist than UNIDO. Heavily penetrated by CPP.
Radical					
Nationalist Alliance for Justice, Freedom, and Democracy	Lorenzo Tanada Father Dixon Abraham Sarmiento	Manila	Overthrow of Marcos. Removal of US bases.	National Democratic Front groups among students, professionals, and the Church.	Anti-US; dominated by CPP.

* A transitional group is one that has been formed relatively recently, is organized primarily around issues, and rejects the traditional personality-oriented politics of the pre-marital-law elite.

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